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# The Carter Military Road

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United States Department of Agriculture

Forest Service

Intermountain Region



Willie Carter (upper right, in derby)  
(Utah Division of  
State History)

An early photo of Judge Carter's son, taken with soldiers at Fort Bridger in the 1880's. Willie carried on the road building his father started, and survived into the mid-20th century. His account provides much of the history we know of the Carter Military Road.

## Road Cut Through Bedrock (USDA Forest Service)

Construction was difficult, requiring clearing large boulders, felling trees, and laying corduroy in marshy areas. Road builders cut the road through bedrock near Browne Lake. This photo was taken in the 1950's.



## THE CONSTRUCTION BEGINS

During the summer of 1881, General George Crook inspected the old Lodgepole Trail that had been used by the Utes to cross the Uinta Mountains. Crook approved this route as the supply route to the garrison at Fort Thornburgh. Routes from Park City and Heber City had been considered, but the route across the Uintas was chosen to accommodate Carter, and because it was the shortest, if not the easiest.

Minor work on the trail commenced immediately under Carter's direction. He died of pneumonia in November, contracted from working on the road in harsh weather. His son, William Jr. (Willie), returned from Cornell University to continue his father's work. In May of 1882, Willie Carter attempted the first freighting across the trail with 22 six-mule teams and wagons. Years later, he recalled the difficulty of the effort:

"It soon became evident that from the character of the past winter at Fort Bridger, we had very erroneous conceptions of what we would encounter in attempting to freight through the mountains so early in the spring. The dugway between Sand Canyon and Lodgepole was blocked with snow and ice, which had to be removed before we could get our outfit up the mountain. At the head of the dugway the road was almost impassable. Ravines filled with melting snow and water nearly up to the wagon beds; bogs in which both teams and wagons were often mired down at the same time; hills so soft that all the teams we could hook on were often required to pull a single wagon to the top; the slopes so sliding that the whole crew, with ropes, were needed to keep a loaded wagon from upsetting; were everyday experiences.

... In one locality, a separate road had to be cut through the timber for each wagon. The ground at this place appeared dry and firm, but each wagon broke through a thin crust into quicksand beneath, making the road impassable for the next team."

In the summer of 1882, the Army sent work parties, but the primary commitment of the military to roadbuilding came in the summer of 1883. Four companies of troops were sent to build the road under Major I. De Russey. The Major's detachment worked out of a field camp at Burnt Cabins. They did most of the work we can now see.

Their work consisted largely of corduroying (laying lodgepole pine fogs across marshy sections), clearing large boulders, and constructing dugways (road cuts and fills). The troops also set up a sawmill in Summit Park to supply Fort Thornburgh, and a military telegraph line was strung along the route.

De Russey's force worked hard during the summer. A review of military records from the National Archives reveals that court martials were carried out almost weekly. Troops were fined several weeks' pay for disorderly conduct, drunkenness, desertion and other offenses that indicate the difficulty of the work and lonely social conditions in this remote wilderness.

By 1883, it became clear that the route was a poor choice because of the high terrain and short season of travel. In addition, a Denver and Rio Grande Railroad route was completed, linking Salt Lake City and Denver through Price, Utah. Supplies could easily be wagon-freighted to the Ashley Valley from Price.

Fort Thornburgh was abandoned in 1884, and most of the durable items were hauled back to Fort Bridger. When Fort Duchesne was established in the summer of 1886, some materials were hauled back over the Carter Road, but most came from the new rail depot at Price.

## NEW USES FOR THE ROAD

Although military use of the Carter Road ceased, it continued to be important to local inhabitants. The road was used to haul copper, gold, and silver ore from the Dyer Mine during the last decade of the 1800's. It was the primary north-south wagon route from Daggett County to the Vernal area until the early 1920's, when a passenger car road was constructed along the route of Utah Highway 44.

Daggett County historians Dick and Vivian Dunham state that "while [the Carter Road] was treacherous for heavy loads, hardy souls could at least get over to Ashley Valley in a huckboard to pick up honey and apples, then as now that district's specialties; or maybe take a sack or so of grain over to the grist mill to be ground into flour."

In 1880, Ashley (or Vernal, as it was called after 1885) became the main government seat. "So to Ashley or Vernal everybody had to go to file on land, pay taxes, get married, serve or answer writ, or any other official business," the Dunhams say. "For these trips the old road came in mighty handy. It was used right up until 1924. Some adventurous souls even managed to get their Model-T's part way over it."

In 1936, Willie Carter commented, "To the traveler who comes upon this road at any part of its course through the Uinta Range, it seems to present an unusual example of wasted effort and money, but like many other of the works of man, it served its purpose, and gave way to changes in the development of the country."

Trail markers indicate locations where features related to the Carter Road are still visible. Features associated with a few markers are described below to illustrate the variety of remains which you will encounter.

- 1 West of the modern forest road is a row of telegraph poles. If you look downslope from the marker you'll notice trail ruts in the sagebrush. The rocky crust of the soil here is easily traveled by wagons, but when ruts dug into the soft subsoil, a new trail would be cut.

Here you can see the original roadbed beside the modern road.

- 2 The Carter Road follows the west side of Government Creek. It's easily visible through the trees because it's cut into the hillside.
- 3 A government sawmill was constructed here to supply Fort Thornburgh. The Carter Road lies several hundred yards west. In a clearing above the road are cabins that were probably used by people working the sawmill.
- 4 A portion of the Carter Road runs 20 feet west of the present road. In narrow rocky areas such as this, considerable effort was necessary to clear rock from the roadbed.
- 5 This is a well preserved section of corduroy. Logs have been placed side by side across the wet meadow to prevent wagons from sinking into the bog. PLEASE STAY OFF THIS SECTION OF THE TRAIL. IT IS EASILY DAMAGED.
- 6 This small stone structure is called a powder magazine. It was used to store black powder for road construction.
- 7 This cabin may have been constructed as a way station where wagon drivers would stay overnight. It is also believed to be the place where Judge Carter was ill just before he died at Fort Bridger.
- 8 Here the telegraph line and road did not follow the same route. The telegraph line heads west through Sheep Creek Park; the road stays north of the park, paralleling the present road.
- 9 A well preserved section of the Carter Road lies just west of the Long Park Reservoir. It's partially hidden by young trees growing where timber was previously cut. If you can find it you won't be disappointed.
- 10 This road cut is appropriately called the Carter Dugway. Because it is so steep and long, it was the most difficult part of the road to travel.
- 11 From the Forest boundary the Carter Road heads north to Burnt Fork where it meets the road started by Major Baldwin in 1865 from Fort Bridger to Browns Park. This portion of the road has not been carefully traced.



Scale in Miles  
0 1 2 3 Miles

#### LEGEND

National Forest

National Forest Boundary

County Boundary

Special Area Boundary

Carter Military Road

US Highway

State Highway

National Forest Road Maintained for Passenger Cars

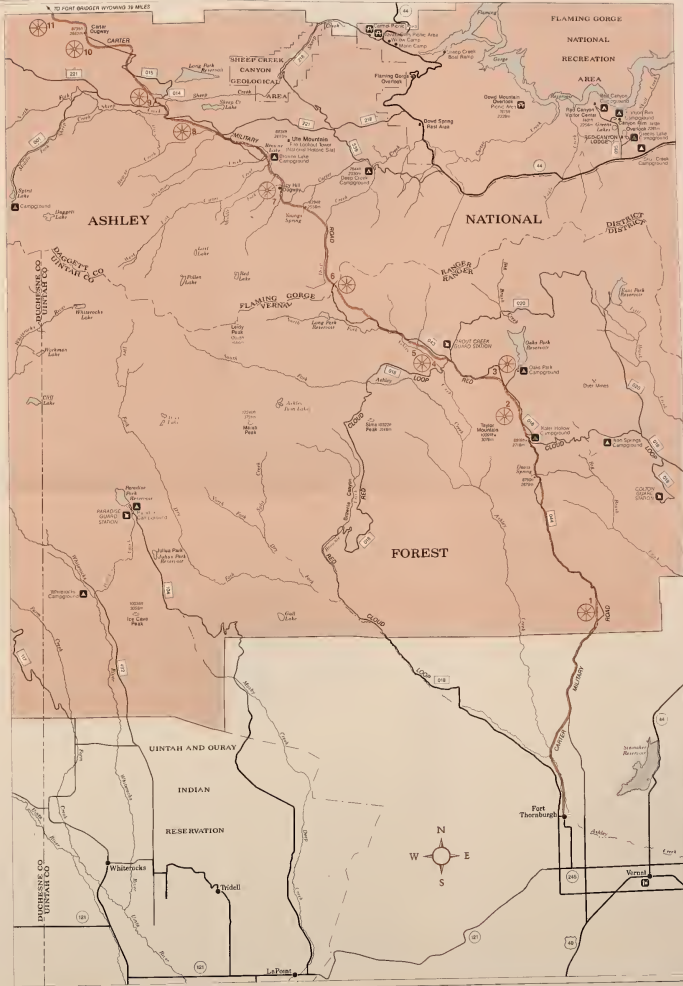
Forest Headquarters/Ranger District Office

Campground, National Forest

Picnic Area, National Forest

Guard Station

Trail Marker





If you would like more information about the Carter Military Road, contact:  
**Ashley National Forest Supervisor's Office**  
355 North Vernal Avenue  
Vernal, Utah 84078  
Telephone (801) 789-1181

If you plan to hike the length of the road, you may wish to use USGS quadrangle maps. They can be purchased at this office.



**Freight Wagon and Ox Teams**  
(Utah Division of State History)

Wagons of this kind were used to traverse the Carter Military Road. Oxen replaced mules because of their great strength and endurance. A preserved wagon can be seen at Fort Bridger.



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# The Carter Military Road

**I**n the late 1870's, the Utah Territory still had only a small population, mostly scattered along the Wasatch Front in towns of orderly Mormon design. Heber City was the eastern edge of civilized territorial settlement, and it was a good two-day ride from the Wasatch Front. Only a few sheepherders and cattlemen trespassed on the large Ute reservation, established in the Uinta Basin by President Lincoln and Congress in the early 1860's. Most of the Uinta Basin, Colorado Plateau, and the eastern half of Colorado were virtually unsettled by whites.

This area of rich natural resources supported several bands of Ute Indians. The whites, coveting these resources, had begun to encroach on the Utes' large range, leading to confrontations that became increasingly hostile.

At the White River Agency (now Meeker, Colorado), Ute bands became resentful of Indian Agent Nathan Meeker's attempts to reform them into an agricultural society. Fearing for his life, Meeker sought assistance from the military in September of 1879. Major Thomas T. Thornburgh and a column of four companies were sent from Ft. Steele, Wyoming, to assist Meeker. Upon entering the reservation the column was attacked by over 700 mounted Utes. Sixteen soldiers died, including Thornburgh, and 43 were wounded. At the same time, Meeker and 10 other employees were killed at the agency. As a result of these skirmishes, the Ute bands involved and other bands—including Chief Ouray's Uncompaghres from western Colorado—were coerced onto the Utah reservation, joining Chief Tabiona's band from the Uinta Basin.

About one hundred white settlers lived in the Ashley Valley, where Vernal now lies. They were mostly cattlemen who had been attracted to the area by lush grazing lands on the flanks of the Uinta Mountains. After Custer's defeat in 1876, and the fighting in western Colorado, they became concerned for their safety.

In 1881, Fort Thornburgh was established at the mouth of Ashley Canyon, just northwest of Vernal, so that the Army could ensure that the Utes were kept on the reservation. The fort's location was uncomfortably remote, given the recent bloodshed. It was several days march from Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City, and more from Denver or other help in Colorado.



**Judge William A. Carter**  
(Utah Division of State History)

As sutler of Fort Bridger in Wyoming, Judge Carter gained considerable personal wealth and status. Through his lobbying efforts in Washington, he was awarded the contract to supply Fort Thornburgh. Carter died of pneumonia while building the wagon road across the Uintas from Fort Bridger to Fort Thornburgh.

## JUDGE CARTER'S ROAD

**A**t Fort Bridger in southwest Wyoming, the entrepreneurial Judge William A. Carter had made a profitable career out of provisioning the Army. Described by former Uintah County Historian Mike Brown as "the very image of the Southern gentleman," Carter had been raised in Virginia and fought Florida Indians in the Seminole War. When he did not receive a commission in the Army, he resigned and became post trader at Fort Lauderdale. In 1858, when Johnston's army was sent west to quell the "Mormon Rebellion," Carter accompanied the expedition as the civilian supplier.

Carter settled at Fort Bridger and quickly amassed a fortune trading with soldiers, emigrants, railroad builders, cattlemen, and Indians. In 1858, he was appointed post trader, postmaster, and probate judge. He also participated in mining, lumber, and cattle ventures.

Carter's business suffered after troops were removed from Fort Bridger in 1878. He used the growing fears of the local white population to lobby in Washington for a return of troops. Carter also hoped to continue and enhance his relationship with the Army by supplying Fort Thornburgh. Carter was successful in his efforts. Troops returned to Fort Bridger and he was awarded a contract to supply Fort Thornburgh.

**Tabiona, Uinta-Ais Ute Chief**  
(Wyoming State Museum)

Chief Tabiona's band had been settled in the Uinta Basin since the late 1860's. The modern town of Tabiona bears his name. After the Meeker Massacre, other Ute bands from western Colorado were sent to the Uintah-Ouray Reservation, causing major upheavals.



**Mounted Utes**  
(Wyoming State Museum)

A Ute warrior and boy shown in traditional dress in the late 19th century.

The Carter Military Road followed the route of the old Lodgepole Trail, which had been used by the Utes to cross the Uinta Mountains.



